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### The ultimate return

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## **The Ultimate Return: Dissent, Apostolic Succession, and the Renewed Ministry of Roman Catholic Women Priests.**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> June 2002 seven women from Germany, Austria, and the United States boarded a specially chartered pleasure boat on the Danube river, and were ordained to the Catholic priesthood before some 200 family, friends, supporters and journalists. It is said that the event was preceded by months of tantalizing secrecy. A small group of reporters invited to witness the ordinations was instructed to show up in a parking lot in Passau, Germany, at 8:30 am on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, and it was only after gathering at the designated spot that they learnt the event would take place on board a boat. All else remained a mystery, including the identities of the presiding bishops and the ordinands themselves, until the boat had left the jetty and the ceremony began.<sup>1</sup> The ceremony was presided over by Romulo Antonio Braschi, an independent Catholic bishop, and the women ordained that Bavarian summer's day have since become known as 'the Danube seven'. The Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) movement that blossomed from this ceremony is, today, a worldwide renewal movement within the Roman Catholic Church which aims to re-shape the Church from within to create an 'inclusive, Christ-centered Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.<sup>2</sup>

The Danube Ceremony turned out to be, in no uncertain terms, an 'event' in the revolutionary sense elaborated by Alain Badiou (2003) via his interpretation of St

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, John L. Jr. [http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2002c/071902/ordinations.htm](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2002c/071902/ordinations.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org/NEWhistory.htm>

Paul. Not only did it subsequently gain its very own Wikipedia entry, it has clearly come to serve as an important temporal marker for those within its orbit. The first words one reads on the front page of the RCWP official website establish its importance as a founding event and in 2012, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the little pleasure boat setting forth, the National Catholic Reporter ran an article to celebrate the “Historic Ordination of seven women on the Danube River.” The article features a key statement from the theologian Dr. Ida Raming, one of the women priests ordained on the Danube, which sets, or perhaps builds upon, the symbolic importance of this event:

Women priests are living prophetic obedience to the Spirit as we disobey an unjust, man-made, canon law that prohibits women’s ordination. In order to change an unjust law, we must break it. For some, like the hierarchy, women priests are a spiritual uprising, but for millions, the time has come for a holy shakeup that brings new life, creativity, and equality to our church. Let us give thanks to God for the international women priests movement leading the way toward a renewed priestly ministry on our tenth anniversary!

Raming’s statement is notable for the language it juxtaposes: “obedience” and “uprising”; “hierarchy” and “equality”. Like the Danube event itself, Raming’s statement is forward-looking and defiant, even as it strikes a notion of cautious obedience to the Roman Catholic Church as a divinely hierarchical structure. One could say that the Danube Ceremony, like this statement, was remarkable in similar ways. On the one hand it broke the traditional template laid down for ordination to the Catholic priesthood, even as it displayed a certain faithfulness of form to the rite of

ordination. Reflecting on the peculiar dissonance of this ritual repetition highlights the nature of many liberal-minded Roman Catholic people's dissent against Catholicism's traditionally "infallible", authoritarian core, embodied by the Vatican and headed by the Pope. In this article I focus on dissent that strives boldly but ambivalently for public recognition. Dissent that speaks out but remains, nonetheless, camouflaged in gendered forms of humility and obedience. What is striking about this kind of dissent is that it neither aligns with maintaining the status quo or with what could be seen as radical change, but rather with changing the course of repetitions themselves and bringing to light a continuity that was there all along.

In other words, I am interested in the capacity of dissent that strives for *difference but not rupture* from the "one true" Roman Catholic Church. The dissenters I here focus on are Scottish and American, and identify themselves as Roman Catholic Women Priests and Roman Catholic laypeople who support the struggle for women's ordination, hereafter to be referred to RCWP supporters. The RCWP supporters I worked with, despite their varied ages and backgrounds, had two things in common: a deep-felt sense of frustration and sadness at the perceived misogyny structuring the church as an institution, and a reticence to publically express it. As Roman Catholics loyal to the visible unity of the Church, their forms of questioning were simultaneously bold and meek, innovative and procrastinating, visible and secretive.

My aim in this article is twofold, firstly to forward an anthropological approach to the topic of "different repetitions" as outlined by Bandak and Coleman (Introduction), one that cannot assume such a concept to be analytically salient apart from the perspectives of our research participants who elaborate them. And secondly, to tease

apart two interconnected dimensions of that which might broadly be termed “religious dissent”. I argue that not only do we need to distinguish between dissent in theory and dissent in practice; in order to understand the lives of RCWP supporters we need an even finer distinction, between being a dissenter and being *with dissent*. Exploring such distinctions helps to shed light on two enduring mysteries: first, why RCWP do not leave the Roman Catholic Church, despite aligning theologically, politically, socially and intellectually with any number of liberal-leaning Other Catholic or mainstream Protestant churches. And second, how dissent crystallizes as a very particular notion and experience of repetition, when influenced by notions of gender. Both these mysteries revolve around the question of when a repetition ceases to be a repetition – a topic to which I now turn.

### **Ordination: the Quintessence of Sacred Repetition**

The Catholic priesthood is the quintessence of repetition. A priest can only be made through a sacrament involving the “laying on of hands” by another priest (a bishop), who in turn was made a priest by one who was made a priest by the same process. In this sense, the DNA of ordination begins with Jesus’ singling out of St Peter and continues through time in an unbroken process known as apostolic succession. The laying on of hands is the mechanism that transmits the Holy Spirit in a form that marks the ordinand out for the specific purpose of ministry. Catholic ordination is said to impart an “indelible mark” on the soul. The change to the self of the ordinand is henceforth permanent in character; once done it cannot be undone. A Catholic priest, validly ordained, is ontologically altered and thus becomes a direct successor of St Peter, who in turn is imagined as the rock (*kipha*) upon which the Church is figuratively built. St Peter, however, is not only the foundation but himself an echo of

Christ, the ultimate originator of priestly DNA. An ordained priest is, in fact, the ultimate embodiment of sacred repetition at that transitory moment, during the Eucharistic ritual, when he performs *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ). In the moment of consecrating the host, a priest is not Benjamin, Tony, or John the individual, but a tangible repetition of Jesus, whose sacred person his ministry truly represents.

The canon law which governs the administration of the sacraments (Canon 1024) limits the matter of ordination to men only. Licit ordination and valid ordination are herein differentiated. To be *valid* only a laying on of hands in direct apostolic succession is required, *to be licit* the ordinand should be a baptized man. An ordination can therefore be any combination of licit and valid, and it is the combinatory status on which the crucial question of difference hangs. The ideal combination to have is validity *and* legality. To have both at the same time is to partake most accurately or intensely in the unbroken line extending back to St Peter. To be valid but not licit (as women priests can logically claim to be) is to be at one remove from the regnant ideal, but nevertheless to be, ontologically, a priest in the Catholic sense. There is still enough core continuity in a valid but illicit ordination for the repetition to count. An ordination that is licit but not valid (a highly improbable event) represents yet another convergence of intensities, individuated from the original event of St Peter's bestowal. Finally, there can be ordinations that are neither valid nor licit. Too differentiated to count as repetitions – ordinations that can only be interpreted as a rupture with tradition.

Let us return to the Danube event. To take the differences or “failures” of repetition first of all: Most obviously, here was an event that took place in open defiance of church teaching. Not only were the ordinands' bodies differently shaped, its Mass

included normally prohibited clergy of the Lutheran and Old Catholic churches as concelebrants. With Father Antonio Braschi at the helm, the dissonance intensifies. Despite his claim to validity, Braschi is an ex Roman Catholic cleric, whose involvement with the breakaway ‘Catholic-Apostolic-Church of Brazil’ has generated question marks about his claim to stand in apostolic succession. In media narrations of the Danube event journalists commonly home in on Braschi’s checkered past, and draw attention to details that differentiate the ordinations from other similar ceremonies. We learn of “surreal flourishes”, such as the Paraguayan folk band belting out an instrumental version of Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” as a lead-in to the “Our Father”. We learn of an altercation that occurred at the press conference held afterwards when an Austrian conservative and owner of a local newspaper blurted at one of the women priests: “You have nice breasts and I would like to see you sunbathe naked!” (Allen 2002)

Nevertheless, careful reading of such reports suggests that concern for correct procedure and ritual detail was also very much present. At one point, it is said that Braschi read a prayer in Spanish that referred to *hermanos*, “brothers.” Someone in the crowd called out “and *hermanas*,” (“and sisters”) whereupon it is reported that Braschi wheeled sharply: “Today we follow the Roman rite.” Despite its undeniable uniqueness, then, the ritual conformed faithfully to template, replicating the precise and propitious configuration of people, vestments, words, actions and prayers necessary for the sacrament to occur, all orchestrated with care and precision. In a belt-and-braces approach, all seven women were later re-ordained *sub-conditionis* - a technical term meaning that the second ordination would be valid only if the first one was not. The second ordination took place in a secret ceremony at a secret location, presided over by a Czech bishop who – unlike the bishop Braschi – was legally within

the Roman Catholic Church. The identity of this Czech bishop remains to this day a well-guarded mystery. In order to verify that the second ceremony did in fact take place, a signed witness account that contains his name and identity has been locked away in a closed archive that can only be accessed after the bishop's death.

What are we to make of this? Despite the fact that this ordination could easily be interpreted as an event that displayed unique qualities, the mandate was actually to reproduce something timeless and essential. Attention to details, the wording of a prayer, the laying on of hands – every action possible was taken to ensure that at the moment of laying on of hands, the ordinands would be mystically filled with the Holy Spirit - a spiritual substance that can only be known to humans as eternal and hence unchanging.

### **Excommunication: the Quintessence of Sacred Differentiation**

Edinburgh, Scotland, 2014: I am on the phone with Morag Liebert, a retired nurse in her late 60s and the only ordained Roman Catholic Woman priest in the UK. Morag's church is her Marchmont flat in south-central Edinburgh. For a couple of years now I have been attending the monthly "House Mass," which she celebrates at her kitchen table. Every so often we meet up for tea, to discuss the matter of women priests. Our conversations go on for hours. Morag knows about my research on women priests and views it as a contribution to the cause. However, our relationship has not always been smooth sailing. Like partners learning a new dance, our interactions can sometimes be awkward. I am the one with two left feet, not being a Roman Catholic. I keep stepping



on Morag's toes, assuming a collaborative intimacy that is not there, probing her to speak to me about matters she wants to remain silent about. Our latest tussle is about her excommunication from the Catholic Church. As an anthropologist of Catholicism I am intrigued. I have never met anyone who has been officially excommunicated and I want to know all about it: the precise order of events, what was said, what feelings it precipitated. But Morag is reticent to speak to me about the experience. I am confused, however, because in other moments she will remind me, almost proudly, of her excommunicated status. "I am excommunicated, which means I am publically in trouble, and everyone knows that," she will state with a mischievous glint in her eyes, before adroitly throwing me off course by adding "but I can't speak to you in detail about it. I'm sorry. The subject is closed."

During interviews the voice recorder goes constantly on and off at Morag's signal. Some things can be both spoken and recorded, other things only spoken about, but not recorded. And then there is all the information that Morag will not speak about – although she hints judiciously at its existence.

Today we are on the phone discussing my desire to interview the parish priest who performed her excommunication. The priest in question is willing to be interviewed, but only with Morag's permission. Morag is reluctant to pass on her permission for me to do this and I am attempting to reason with her. Surely it is important that all sides of the story are recorded for posterity? But Morag is not to be swayed. She tells me that she has written the story of her excommunication down in detail and deposited the document into a closed archive in the Glasgow Women's Library. That archive, she tells me, will only become accessible after her death. "If I think I'm going to pop my clogs" she says, "I'll let you know, alright? ... I don't think I'm going to depart anytime soon

though,” she adds, a wry smile playing on her voice down the phone. This episode is illustrative of something I have noted more generally in my study of Roman Catholic women priests: a proclivity for secrecy, and an attempt to keep dissent from view.

Let us return then to the two rites mentioned - ostensible inversions of one another: ordination - a paramount rite of repetition, versus excommunication - a paramount rite of differentiation. Why have seminal details of both types of events been secreted away in closed archives? From one perspective, what these archives hold is written information in the form of names, dates, signatures, and other “objective facts” that - were they publically known about - could lead to sackings, death threats, harassments and excommunications. But what else do these archives do? They constitute repositories for excess – excess difference, excess repetition – the excess linkages and ruptures generated by dissenting Catholics. Indeed, and as we shall see in the ethnography that follows, difference (not as a transcendent principle, but as a relation – difference from) is the problem *par excellence* for Roman Catholic women priests. Their social and biological difference from men is, in certain contexts (the home, the bedroom, the kitchen) a positive; a thing to be celebrated. But in other contexts (political, authoritative, institutional) it is not.<sup>3</sup> A Roman Catholic woman priest’s difference from a man is compounded by her dissenting position within the Church. Her dissent echoes her existential difference. Her sexual features, her “feminine qualities” rebound that dissent. The result: a potentially escalating spiral of difference, which is dangerous in a religion that places a supreme value on seamless continuity.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on shifting gender ideologies in Catholic thought, see Mayblin 2017a.

## **Catacomb Deacons and Congregants**

Catholic women in training for the priesthood are sometimes called “catacomb priests” because they carry out the bulk of their training in secret. Women seeking ordination have first to undergo a psychological evaluation and criminal background check. Passing these hurdles they may be allowed to embark on a program of formation that involves the acquisition of a Masters degree in Theology or Divinity or the equivalent, a minimum of ten units of Sacramental Preparation under the guidance of an assigned mentor, a course of “hands on” Liturgical Practice with an assigned mentor, and a program of spiritual discernment involving regular meetings with a qualified spiritual director for at least one year before and after diaconate ordination. The RCWP guided program of spiritual discernment takes much the same form as it does among male candidates to the priesthood. In traditional fashion, it consists of guided reflection on the state of the self, regular prayer, and continual questioning of one’s vocation. As an organization the RCWP thus exacts the same level of inner commitment, theological immersion, supervised study, and “hands on” liturgical and pastoral practice from women candidates for the priesthood as Vatican approved seminaries do from men. Obvious differences, however, separate each pathway. For women entering the priesthood there is no mandatory vow of celibacy, and as formation tends to occur whilst living at home, it may be more subject to the demands of ordinary life (children, sexual relationships, housework, and/or secular employment). Men’s formation, on the other hand, remains somewhat removed from such concerns, occurring as it does within the cloistered atmosphere of the single-sex seminary.

There are numerous catacomb women priests across the Catholic world whose

identities remain a closely guarded secret. Some of them are destined to come out and become what the mainstream secular and Roman Catholic media call would call “renegade priests” but not all of them will do so, even after ordination (Turner 2016; Kirchgaessner 2016). As such, although many RCWP candidates communicate frequently with one another in chat-room forums on the internet - and occasionally via letter, phone and personal email - individual contact details are not made easily accessible and passwords to internet chat-rooms remain a strictly guarded secret. The shades of caution and secrecy that surround this movement are not merely aesthetic, they are, I was told on more than one occasion, for women’s own safety. Although women priests considered their actions and vocations to be blessed, validated and therefore under the divine protection of the Holy Spirit, they nevertheless felt themselves to be somewhat alone and outside of the protection of the Church. Without the support of the institution women priests have fewer resource-capacitated networks to draw on and are at higher risk from verbal and physical assault from members of radically conservative splinter groups.

It was an ordinary evening in November and I had turned up at Morag’s for her House Mass. It was dark and windy when I had set out on the journey across town and, after a long day’s work, it was all I could do to force myself out into the cold again. Nevertheless, the thought that Morag’s other Mass attenders may have been feeling the same way had me worried that Morag would find herself with no congregants, and this propelled me onwards.

Morag opened the door in her white cassock and immediately announced that I was the first to arrive. Walking me through to her kitchen she chatted breezily through a list of people who would not be attending for various reasons – away fishing in the

Highlands, busy with a houseful of family, tired from having just started a new job, travelling in England, and so forth. Listening to Morag's typically detailed report of expected absences I wondered, not for the first time, if the Mass would be cancelled for lack people. But then a familiar silhouette appeared behind the mottled glass of her front door: it was Lucy, a long-time congregant. Morag, suddenly smiling again, rushed through the darkness of the hallway to let her in. Lucy and I greeted one another and, exchanging warm glances of relief that neither of us was to be the only congregant, we hung up our coats and filed into the kitchen.

In Morag's kitchen the light was on and table laid with a brilliant white damask cloth. There were six chairs around it and six places laid, not with plates for supper but with orders of service for Mass. Only the place at the head of the table, the "altar," was laid out differently, with a small, brightly painted South-American folk-art cross, a small flat leather purse somewhat smaller than a matchbox containing a religious relic ("probably a sample of cloth from a deceased saint's habit" speculated Morag), a silver chalice and matching paten, and a small embroidered corporal. Other accoutrements included several copies of the Bible, and three thick candles coloured red, blue, and white, all burnt-down to around a third of their original height.

Jovial chatter accompanied us as we settled into our chairs and picked up our orders of service. All the same, the remaining orders of service lay beside us as poignant reminders that Morag had expected many more people that night. Glancing around at the empty chairs I remembered Morag once telling me about a time, some years ago, when, during the busy festival period in August eight or nine people had come to her Mass and there weren't enough chairs. I could not help but picture her in my mind's eye flustered and happy on this particular evening, darting out of the kitchen in a waft

of white vestments to gather up extra seating. That evening Morag had only Lucy and I for Mass, and we were each assigned a part to read. I got the psalm and Lucy the verse from Deuteronomy. The Mass went smoothly and predictably, and after a good half-hour of news gathering and informal chatter at the end, we departed.

Morag's Mass was normally an intimate affair. Usually one or two people would turn up, only very rarely was every seat at the table filled, and on some occasions, Morag informed me, actually no one came. Morag explained the paucity of celebrants as due to a mixture of religious caution on the one hand, and secularization on the other. Of the many Catholics she knew who went to Church regularly, she told me, most were supportive of women's ordination but did not want to be identified by the immediate Catholic community as schismatics. "For that reason they don't come to my Mass, or they only come in secret. They will not spread the word about me to their friends, for obvious reasons, so others don't necessarily know about my house Mass." She then added, "of course, of the many of those who don't attend the reason is not that they don't support the cause so much as that they are not church goers. They are interested in my work and will always ask about it, but they don't really practice. Well, that's the story all over in this country – not many people do church anymore."

It was true that Morag's most frequent Mass attenders were fairly liberal in outlook and somewhat lapsed in their manner of being Catholic (cf. Mayblin 2017). One or two did not attend Church on a weekly basis anyway, others did but were divorced or remarried and therefore outside of the Eucharistic fold. Morag's congregation, such as it was, even featured a few unbaptized souls.<sup>4</sup> One lady had come to Morag following estrangement from a deeply conservative Protestant sect, and then there was myself:

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<sup>4</sup> Unbaptized attenders such as myself cannot receive the Eucharist, but may receive a blessing instead.

an unbaptized agnostic anthropologist whose presence as an observer Morag tolerated with patience and respect. But we, the lapsed and unbaptized, were not Morag's only congregants, for her Mass was also attended by certain devout and regular Church-going Roman Catholics. The presence of the latter at Morag's Mass had to remain strictly secret. For example, as an anthropologist I was forbidden from taking their photos, and more or less discouraged from including them as participants in my research. Like "catacomb deacons" in preparation for the priesthood, ordained Roman Catholic women priests across the world may have any number of "catacomb congregants" mixed in among their flocks. These devout, regularly church-going Roman Catholic congregants sought to attend Morag's Mass quietly or in secret and, for some, it therefore helped that they were evening affairs. Their attendance was also based on the level of trust they had in Morag herself to collude in keeping their support for her secret.

Morag's congregants, both men and women, had much in common: all were in favor of women's ordination and disagreed to various degrees with the Church's official teachings on subjects such as sex, gender, divorce and remarriage, but one thing that separated them was the manner in which they embodied that dissent. Congregants one might define as lapsed or as "Other Catholics" (cf. Byrne 2016 ) were comfortable defining themselves as dissenters, whereas congregants who were otherwise devout and regular church attenders of another Roman Catholic parish were not. Whereas the former consisted largely of what we might define as Catholic *dissenters* – people who consciously allowed their dissent to express itself in actions (or non-actions) toward the mainstream Church, the latter consisted largely of Catholics *with dissent*; that is, Catholics who did not allow their dissent to dominate their relationship with the mainstream church, or else were superbly cautious about the manner in which that

dissent might manifest itself.

Morag was a strange category unto herself, both a public dissenter and someone who nevertheless attended weekly Mass at her local parish church. Her continuing presence at that church stemmed partly from loyalty and conviction to the “one true church” and partly from the fact that although her disobedience was enough to get her excommunicated, it was nevertheless redeemable in Canon law (all she had to do was to formally repent), and therefore her continued participation in the life of the church was encouraged and tolerated, perhaps toward that end. So Morag continued attending weekly, but could no longer perform altar service duties and was forbidden from receiving the Eucharist. Instead of communing she was allowed to join the queue in order to receive a blessing instead.

Curiously, when news of Morag’s excommunication first spread across the parish not a single church member spoke out against it or voiced any support in public for the campaign for women priests. But Morag distinctly recalled how, at least on an informal and interpersonal level, people did change toward her. At the first formal Mass she attended after the news of her ordination had broken Morag was besieged with hands to shake during the Sign of Peace. After the Mass had ended, men and women who had never spoken to her before walked over to her with “big, wide smiles,” to wish her well and squeeze her hand in earnest congratulation. Morag was clear about the fact that the change she witnessed was never more than this: never more than a sudden clamor of warm hand shakes and radiantly collusive smiles. But it was enough to feel that despite surface appearances, she was widely supported.

It was these, quietly supportive, hand-shaking Catholics I had in mind when I came up with my plan to swell the numbers attending Morag’s Mass. If the catacomb



congregants who came to Morag's Mass could not spread the word for fear of excommunication, maybe I could help by putting up posters advertising Morag's monthly Mass around the university and in the center of town. Perhaps, as well, I suggested to Morag, we could start her up a Facebook page where she could acquire online supporters as well as advertise her services further as a priest.

Enthused and excited by my own idea I studied Morag's face for signs of approval - in my head I had already designed the poster and was scanning the university for apposite walls and notice boards. For a second I thought I saw a flicker of hope alight on Morag's face, but as I talked on about the logistics of starting a Facebook account and the power of social networking, I saw that hope fade to vagueness, reticence, and eventually into mild frustration at my insistence. "I don't think so, Maya. I would not feel comfortable about that" she said. "It cannot be risked. I wouldn't want to cause trouble." "But Morag" I protested, "the university is a secular institution - the Catholic Church has no jurisdiction within it." Morag's refusal to start up a Facebook campaign or put up posters around the university to advertise her services as a priest confounded me. Even if I had to admit that advertising one's services as a Roman Catholic priest was not, perhaps, a particularly priest-like thing to do, still, I imagined that Morag would take such an option seriously. If she was prepared to "come out" to the world as an ordained priest, and to thus to publically assume the identity of an excommunicated woman in battle with the Roman curia, surely, I reasoned, she was also prepared to build a congregation using less orthodox media and methods.

I was wrong on this count, for Morag's reticence did indeed index, in very subtle and delicate ways, the problem of orthodoxy of media and methods. As a priest she had assumed the mantle of an exemplar to the lay Catholic public. As a woman priest,

however, she risked setting a bad example to the lay Catholic public. As such, Morag was rightfully concerned with façades, appearances, and the details of method. As Brian Massumi notes: “the success of the example hinges on the details. Every little one matters. At each new detail, the example runs the risk of falling apart, of its unity of self-relation becoming a jumble” (2002,18). What Hojers and Bandak (2015) have identified across a range of ethnographic examples as a tension between the “stable and the unruly” would thus apply here. As a woman and a priest both “stability” and “unruliness” lurked in *potentia* in her every public action. As a “model of and a model for” the priesthood – to paraphrase Geertz on ritual – Morag was challenged with the task of representing difference without departing from that sacred well-pool of repetition known as apostolic succession. It is possible therefore that on some level Morag feared that unorthodox methods - posters and Facebook accounts -would merely propagate the notion to an uneducated public of the woman priest as a “fraud,” but it was also the case that Morag had to balance this performance of difference and repetition as an authentic *woman* priest would, by demonstrating a very feminine capacity for caring.

### **Dissent: its Gendered Dimensions**

In 2011 I interviewed Megan, a young Catholic woman visiting Edinburgh from the United States. Megan was exploring the possibility of her own priestly vocation, and to that end was in the middle of a voyage for discernment, travelling extensively and meeting up with women priests at every opportunity. Laughingly unsure of the direction her future would take her in, she explained how her vocation was still far from certain, mostly because she couldn’t shake the feeling that female priests were “disobedient – or perhaps that disobedience was unfeminine.” This feeling stemmed

partly from the fact that most of the Catholic women she knew “loathed” the misogyny of the Church but “just kept quiet.” Megan’s desire to make her dissent visible to the world would make her seem, to the vast majority, as “not one of the faithful.”

One of the strategies used to discredit RCWP supporters is to cast their dissent as an abomination of quintessentially Catholic feminine virtues such as self-abnegation and obedience. Women cannot be “called” to the priesthood, runs the argument, so any call they might experience can only be a sign of radical disobedience to God or worse still, of pride. Women priests have been labelled as “power hungry” and as “careerist” by more conservative Catholics in blogs and conversations threads on internet forums, but perhaps the most acerbic charge that has been made against them is that they profoundly misunderstand the nature of the priestly office and of the sacred as a whole. Sacred is that which was laid down for us (the maleness of the priesthood); that which stands beyond the push and pull of “political correctness” and the constantly-shifting values of cultures. Moreover, obedience and submission to sacred authority are Catholic virtues that women, following the example of the Blessed Virgin, should emulate more naturally than men, as it befits their sex. Dissent from tradition is therefore, by definition, un-Catholic and *un-feminine*.

Of the many Catholic RCWP supporters I interviewed many alluded to this ingrained double-bind. How does one attempt to change an institution from the inside when locked on its outside? How does a person dissent without registering disobedience? Disobey without losing one’s Catholicism? Become a woman priest without losing one’s femininity? In short, how does one differ and repeat at the exact same time? When I asked Patricia, an Edinburgh RCWP supporter, about her reluctance to adopt

more attention-grabbing confrontational tactics she explained that Catholic women desiring reform could not risk being perceived as “shrill” or labeled as “harridans” as it could undo decades of hard work. This was a point echoed explicitly by Morag who chastised me for failing to see the utmost importance of working “within the Church, not outside it.” Like other women priests Morag was acutely aware of the dangers as well as the enticements of media engagement. Just as Gisela Forster, one of the original Danube seven, had been when she said at the press conference following the ordination event. “This is a sign of renewal *for* the church, not *against* it.” (Allen 2002).

For Roman Catholic women, therefore, complete obedience to tradition (faithfulness to repetition) has something of a distinctly feminine dimension (or a feminine *association* that may or may not be there for men). But such a dimension may have many potential paths for expression, and, as we shall see in the case of Morag, something like complete obedience may be substituted for an equally gendered value such as “care.”

My mistake was to assume that Morag’s project had only herself at its center. But her most pressing goal was not the selfish fulfillment of becoming a priest and ministering over a large congregation of devout Roman Catholics, it was to care for and protect the church as a sacred institution. The risk with posters and advertising, as Morag saw it, was that ordinary Roman Catholic students and staff who were quietly supportive of women’s ordination but had chosen, for whatever reason, not to stick their necks out, would be forced to confront the issue in a very public space and hence to experience discomfort. Some *anti*-Women’s Ordination Catholics might even feel outraged at the posters and make formal complaints about them, causing trouble for

the “good institution” of the University. The fact that the university was a secular space made no difference in this regard, as Morag had earned her Bachelor of Divinity from the University of Edinburgh and felt a certain responsibility toward it. She cared that posters could inadvertently cast all Edinburgh University Catholics as *dissenters*, thus ruffling feathers and upsetting the Church.<sup>5</sup> Morag’s ethics of care for the institution as a whole involved elements of secrecy and collusion, the use of closed archives to store “unruly” information about individual clerics employed within the Church, and the continual deferment of her own vocational desires in favor of a peaceable status quo. The forbearance and self-abnegation she demonstrated in pursuit of this ethics was, as traditional Catholic views of gender go, feminine to the core.<sup>6</sup>

The reticent acceptance and silent, righteous anger one encounters among dissenting Roman Catholics is not all of the same order. Indeed, one finds ever-finer gradations of toleration for difference within the battle for women’s ordination, and this is an important point to bear in mind. Just as not all of Morag’s congregants wanted their support for women’s ordination to be public knowledge, not all organizational bodies in favor of Roman Catholic women’s ordination accepted the Danube ordinations.

The Austrian branch of the “We Are Church” reform group, the “Church from Below” movement in Germany, the [www.womenpriests.org](http://www.womenpriests.org) web site, Catholic Women’s Ordination, and the New Wine movement in England all discouraged the

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<sup>5</sup> CF. Wynne-Jones (2008) report in *The Telegraph* of Rev Patrick O’Donoghue, the Bishop of Lancaster, blaming university educated Catholics for decline and fragmentation of the Roman Catholic Church. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/3464073/Educated-Catholics-have-sown-dissent-and-confusion-in-the-Church-claims-bishop.html>

<sup>6</sup> Morag’s feminine ethics of ‘care’ could be seen as one refraction of wider strategy Western women have used in the course of drawn-out feminist campaigns. During the worst moments of the sex abuse scandal in the mid 1990s, organizations for Catholic women’s ordination agreed to scale down their activities out of solidarity to the Church as an institution. RCWP campaigners justified this scaling down on the grounds that the Church was sacred ‘despite having sinners within Her fold’. This move was itself reminiscent of British suffragettes who temporarily suspended their actions during the First World War.

June 29 event, arguing that the case for women priests needed to come from the center of the Vatican not from its fringes.

Even Roman Catholic women priests such as Morag, women “in trouble” (Morag’s own words), women who, according the RCWP website, are “no longer asking permission to be priests,” but are “taking back their rightful God-given place ministering to Catholics,” even women such as these remain cautious about the outward forms that dissent may assume. Women like Morag do not want excommunications to proliferate among the Catholic faithful, nor do they publically promote the downfall of key individuals within the clerical hierarchy. Even among these women there exists something of a paradoxical ethics of deep protectiveness for the flawed institution that will not contain them. The manner and intensity, then, with which RCWP campaigners alternate between “raging love and loving rage,” or exchange “pious anger” for pious acquiescence is no insignificant detail when it comes to religious dissent, it is everything.<sup>7</sup>

### **Being a Dissenter and being with Dissent**

What, then, of religious dissent, and is there anything specifically Catholic about the way Catholics do it, as opposed to Protestants, say, or Muslims, Buddhists or Jains? Does religious dissent follow a single, predictable pattern, or is its emergence contingent on radical differences in socially approved codes and communicative forms?

One way we might begin to approach such a question is by focusing on Christianity more broadly, for the history of Christianity is itself often told by scholars and

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<sup>7</sup> See Gudowska (2012) who reports Roman Catholic Woman Priest Monica Kilburn Smith describing her vocation to the priesthood as stemming from a ‘loving rage and a raging love for the church, and a deep caring for women’.

theologians alike in a way that foregrounds the dissenters rather than those living *with* dissent. As such we tend to take for granted that massive differences in Christian traditions originated from the inner convictions of key individuals, or else from the intellectual hard-work of a few key men whose dissenting opposition compelled them to imagine and then propagate alternative models of worship. We need only think of Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the door of All Saints church in Wittenberg in 1517 and starting off the Protestant revolution, for a paradigmatic case. The nailing is of course an “event” implying, as the new Pauline philosophers would have it, some form of radical discontinuity in the time-space sequence (cf. Robbins 2010). Certainly, events such as this, and others like it across the course of Christian history have played key roles in the emergence of new institutions and Christian forms of practice. We would do well to remember, however, that what Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses initially presented was a new way to embody something old: dissent towards the clerical hierarchy. It is only later on that Protestantism as a separate institution is born. In other words being Catholic *with dissent* does not automatically make one a Protestant, just as being a Protestant does not eliminate all potential to *dissent* from certain Protestant practices and ideas. We might then conclude that Christian denominationalism emerges not from wells of intellectual discord, but from subtle differences in how dissent is carried and positioned within the self, and, as a consequence, actualized. Even if Protestantism emerged as a persuasive and viable alternative to Roman Catholicism following Martin Luther’s nailing act, legions of disgruntled Catholics continued to follow the Roman way, they carried on being *with that dissent* rather than enacting it.

Within the Catholic tradition a similar although perhaps less extreme version of the Martin Luther narrative is told, particularly in relation to histories of theology.

“Development of dogma,” writes McBrian, “goes hand in hand with some measure of dissent” (1981:73) . Indeed, this fact is enshrined in narratives of Church history in which the works of dissenting theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas, Marie-Joseph Lagrange, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, and John Curran have even become as McDonough notes “exemplars of paradigmatic shifts in church thought” (2012, 59). As McDonough rightly points out, however: “Although the dissenters in that list are all individuals, there is no necessary cause to say that all dissent emerges primarily from within an individual, or that groups of dissenters are simply followers after the fact of an individual dissent.” (ibid). McDonough’s (2012) study of dissent in the context of Catholic schools, and his systematic arguments and prescriptions for how Catholic institutions should deal with it offers a fascinating window onto the thorny matter of dissent in the contemporary Catholic world, and a wealth of theological dissection of concepts of assent, dissent, conscience and obedience. McDonough’s pedagogical model is supportive of what he calls “productive dissent,” or “internal criticism that promotes the good of the church and does not leap immediately to the antithetical stance of abandoning Catholicism” (2012: 228), and is similar in this regard to what other post-conciliar Catholic theologians have described as “faithful disagreement” (Kaufmann 1995), and “loyal dissent” (Curran 2006). Although many conservative Catholics would deny that there can be such a thing as “faithful disagreement,” for others, the affix of such adjectives makes all the difference as they work crucially to parse dissent from schism.<sup>8</sup> Still, despite the many sophisticated and scholarly treatises on Catholic dissent out there, commentators have remained relatively blind to the many varied and subtle distinctions between “loyal” or “faithful” dissenters and the faithful *with dissent* ,which my ethnography points to.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see Donnelly (2014) and Lents (2014)



Joel Robbins (2007) well rehearsed arguments about rupture and continuity within the anthropology of Christianity are relevant here. Although anthropological debates about differing intensities of rupture and continuity in Christian communities are still ongoing (Chua 2012), it is today fairly accepted that many Protestant forms of Christianity do foreground the idea of “making a break with the past” (Meyer 1998). All the same, we might note that it is only because - as so much of the anthropology of Christianity itself ethnographically testifies - ruptures and breakages are so tricky to negotiate that rupture as a concept comes into view at all.<sup>9</sup>

As the anthropology of more ‘tradition-bound’ Christianities such as Roman Catholicism would suggest, however, elasticity and flexibility in the face of change can be more or less constituent of a religious organization’s DNA, so-to-speak, and it is this that may account for differences in denominational size and spread (Mayblin, Norget, Napolitano 2017). Catholicism *does* seem to have peculiarly elastic capacities when it comes to containing difference. For example, a charismatic individual will witness an apparition, a shrine will grow in popularity, a lay fraternity will form, a radical monastic order will establish itself, a theological school will gain momentum. These things can happen a long way from the center of the Vatican, but the center has a way of remaining an important referent, sometimes through mere association, other times by practices that seek explicitly to re-absorb and re-order those potentially renegade elements. Such processes have been described by Mayblin, Norget and Napolitano (2017) as “cannibalistic” for the manner in which they generate strength for the core through auto-consumption. For example, when Vatican representatives formally legitimize this or that shrine by carefully orchestrated appearances within and around it, they are ostensibly consuming (and ultimately drawing force from) a

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<sup>9</sup> See Handman (2014) and Bialecki (2014) for complex discussions of this theme in relation to Protestantism.

spiritual essence that is already popularly recognized as emanating from deep within the official Church's fold. We see this quite clearly in Agnieszka Halemba's (2015) remarkable study of Marian apparitions in post-soviet Transcarpathia, a context where organizational religion has been notably absent for some time and is struggling to re-establish a foothold. Although the apparition site in Dzhublyk that Halemba describes falls under the territory of the Greek Catholic Eparchy, the responses it has provoked from official church representatives are very similar to those that we see among Roman Catholic clergy at Marian sites across the world. Despite the many controversies that have beset Dzhublyk since its founding, an "intricate dance of negotiations" (2015, 83) have allowed it to stay within the framework of the organizational church, such that ten years after the initial apparition, Dzhublyk is "slowly starting to occupy a stable place within the religious landscape of Transcarpathia" (83). Observing such an "intricate dance" at close range can be slightly perplexing. Writes Halemba:

It is a puzzling situation when I go to Dzhublyk and see the bishop or some other high official celebrating the liturgy at this rapidly growing pilgrimage site, and then, back in Uzhhorod, when I ask them about Dzhublyk I am answered either with silence or, in moments of candor, with shaking heads and deep sighs: 'Ah, well, what can one do? It is there!' (83).

As this marked sense of resignation on the part of church representatives would seem to indicate, processes of cannibalization cut both ways. Just as Dzhublyk, a peripheral site on the Greek Catholic landscape grows more stable by coercing the power of the Church's organizational core, so the organizational core draws strength from the material presence of Dzhublyk as a potent site of pilgrimage.

In the case of the Danube event, on the other hand, this process of cannibalization is more of a one-way street. In order to be sacramentally valid, the women's ordination had to draw strength from the Church's most sacred office. The Danube event could not risk being regarded a mere *imitation* of a rite of ordination ceremony, it had to be a genuine repetition – a material extension of the original rite. The male bishop's secret ministration of the sacrament of the priesthood to the women could thus be read as another instance of the cannibalization of the core by the periphery – a cannibalization so potentially successful that it had to be interrupted by the Vatican with a decree of excommunication. Such processes are akin to the complex appropriations and problematics found in other religious contexts, and could therefore be likened to what Khare describes in the Buddhist/Hindu case as a “synthesizing apperception” (Khare 1976) or Copeman, for Sikhism and its offshoot cults, as a process of “coercive encompassment” (Copeman 2012: 161).

Cannibalization may seem like an unfortunate verb for a Christian context, but it is valid inasmuch as it evokes a sense of consumption, a cyclical swallowing down, a continual containment of the self within the self rather than a movement towards separation and otherness. And it is in this precise sense that I imagine the difference between being a dissenter and being with dissent. Like the Catholic Church as an organization which, broadly speaking, must swallow or expulse its renegades, Catholics with dissent must swallow or expulse their disagreement. A Catholic *with dissent* carries dissent around inside her like so much undigested matter. Every so often a sense of nausea washes over her, but then it ebbs away. For many RCWP supporters, however, the nausea does not go away – a fact which has led some into “renegade” priesthood.

Perhaps there is nothing altogether unusual about this. Being human naturally involves some role play and compartmentalization – reversing the the figure for the ground in order to negotiate our way through different social contexts as the moment requires. All the same, there is something quite distinctive about the kind of dissent this paper deals with which points to the fact that Christian forms of dissent are not all of a kind. Subtle, barely perceptible differences and habits in the way dissent is carried within, or made visible as a thing in-the-world have, over time, lead to massive institutional rents and fissures, giving rise to completely alternative religious pathways.

## **Conclusion**

The movement for the ordination of women priests is both a repetition and a difference, but the question of which category gets foregrounded is both peculiarly gendered and deeply political. Anthropologists and philosophers have engaged in deep or even playful metaphysical discussions about “different repetitions” with no fear of the consequences, but for clergy within the Roman Catholic Church proclamations about difference and repetition with regards to tradition are matters of grave concern. For clergy as well as for RCWP supporters the act of individuating spiritual events, grading them as slightly different from or exact extensions of what went before can have hard hitting consequences on individual lives, resulting in anything from spiritual excommunication to divestment of liturgical office and even loss of income. For RCWP supporters, as I have shown, dissent is really a matter of striving carefully and simultaneously for difference and repetition – for ritual repetition with a difference. For some this involves being a dissenter, for others it involves living *with* dissent, and spiritual renewal is really a matter of degrees of difference within the continual repetition that is the priesthood of

apostolic succession. To paraphrase both Deleuze (1968) and George Orwell (1949), we could say that while all repetitions are different, some are more different than others. The question women's ordination raises is that of when a repetition differs so greatly it ceases to be seen as a repetition at all.

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